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Did You Ever See a Dog Walking?

By C. L. SULZBERGER

PARIS—The world's most influential broadcasting station is perhaps the "Armenian radio" which transmits biting commentaries throughout the U.S.S.R. and which, incidentally, does not exist. Armenia is a Soviet Republic whose population is renowned for mordant wit. The "Armenian radio" is therefore a contrived name for the source of anti-regime jokes.

The Russians have a sharp sense of humor and a traditional gift for irony. Whenever they start a conversation with the phrase "according to the Armenian radio," it is certain that a sarcastic commentary with political overtones will follow. The combined impact on the Soviet regime of the Voice of America, the British Broadcasting Corporation and Radio Peking is probably less than the susurrous satire of the "Armenian radio's" anonymous non-existence.

Whatever goes wrong in the U.S.S.R., even though it escapes mention in the official Communist press, is rapidly seized upon by the "Armenian radio." This has led Izvestia, the Government organ that is edited by Khrushchev's son-in-law, to complain:

"We often pass by those who tell funny stories. We perhaps underestimate the harm done by their tongues. But the damage they do is great. At the slightest difficulty or trouble in our enormous economy they start buzzing like bad-tempered autumn flies."

It is the good fortune of this writer to know someone who keeps a well-attuned crystal set fixed to the lucid murmurs of the "Armenian radio." Some two years ago I reported on its emissions as picked up in his eager headphones. This radio ham has now provided notes on more recent broadcasts which include the following "Armenian" comments on the Soviet scene.

Question: Why was Khrushchev awarded a fourth Order of Lenin on his 70th birthday? Answer: Because he created the eighth wonder of the world by showing the world that it is in Kazakhstan and reap it in North America.

Observation: Lenin thought that Communism is Soviet power plus electrification; Khrushchev teaches that Communism equals farm collectivization plus Canada.

Elephant Joke, Armenian Style

Question, addressed to the "Armenian radio": Can an elephant rupture itself? Answer: Yes, by raising the agricultural question.

The "Armenian radio" is quite as interested in international affairs as in internal problems. In a recent comment on Sino-Soviet relations it had this to say: The Soviet Union and China went to war and on the first day one million Chinese surrendered. On the second day two million more surrendered. On the third day another five million surrendered. On the fourth day Mao Tse-tung called up Khrushchev and inquired: "Do you give up now?"

The radio's commentators also pay attention to local political trends. One of them is asked why a new Kremlin decree contemplates abolishing the letter M. "But there isn't any reason to continue it," he insists. "There is no meat. There is no milk. There is no maize. There is no Malenkov. There is no Molotov. Should we keep an entire letter in the alphabet just for Mikoyan?" Undoubtedly a popular leader, comes in for his share of Armenian acerbity.

The radio reports that two comrades confront each other in a very slow-moving queue at G.U.M., the principal Moscow department store. Finally one of them becomes so angry at the long wait in line that he says:

"I'm so fed up that I'm going to the Central Committee and punch Khrushchev in the nose." "You wouldn't dare," he is told. "I wouldn't, eh? Just watch me." And he strides off toward Central Committee headquarters. A little while later he reappears and his friend asks: "Did you punch him in the nose?" "No," is the reply.

"Hah! I knew you were a coward." "I'm no coward. The queue of those waiting to punch Khrushchev in the nose is even longer than the queue for G.U.M. So I decided to come back."

The humor of the "Armenian radio" is not side-splitting but its mere existence in a closed society is of singular importance. One is reminded of Dr. Sam Johnson's comment on a woman preacher: "Sir, a woman's preaching is like a dog's walking on his hind legs. It is not well done at all, but it is the only way to find it done at all."